Rio Grande National Forest Plan Revision
Energy and Minerals
Creede, CO
May 12, 2015
Meeting Summary

Attendance

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Dan Dallas, Erin Minks, Patrick Moran
- *Peak Facilitation*: Heather Bergman, Katie Waller

Approximately 15 members of the public were present.

Meeting Overview

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this meeting to discuss vegetation, timber, and fire on the RGNF. Information gathered from this and previous discussions will help inform and influence the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

Forest Plan Revision and Assessment Process

Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs Officer, explained that the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15-20 years. The last forest plan was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began. The revision consists of three steps: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and last a monitoring phase.

Rather than creating an entirely new plan, plan revision aims to revise the current forest plan by first identifying which aspects need to be changed and which aspects are working well. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform this need for change determination; this meeting focuses on input about energy and mineral resources. In addition to sharing input at this meeting, members of the public are strongly encouraged to stay involved throughout the four-year plan revision process in order to help structure the best possible forest plan.

Patrick Moran, Forest Geologist and Mineral Specialists, explained the legal constraints on the forest. He noted that current mining and energy development is divided into three topics: locatable minerals, leasable minerals, and mineral material. Each category has its own limitations in how it is extracted from the forest and the necessary processes. He clarified that the Forest Service plan is bound by the existing rules and will have to act within these constraints.

Mr. Blakeman noted that since the last forest plan was created, changes to factors like forest health, technology, forest uses, economics, and wildfire regimes have impacted the forest and could potentially affect energy and mineral resources. Mr. Blakeman stressed the importance of participating in the plan revision and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public also can provide input by email at comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us, on the interactive plan revision web site at http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

Assessment Questions

Participants discussed the three main themes related to energy and minerals: resource identification, surface impacts of oil and gas development, and rock collection and mine hazards issues. A summary of key themes from the discussion follows.

What are the most significant renewable and/or non-renewable energy and mineral resources on the Rio Grande National Forest? Do these resources contribute to the social and economic sustainability of the region? How so?

Renewable Resources	• Geothermal • Solar power • Hydropower • Wind • Biomass
Non-renewable Resources on RGNF	• Mining in Mineral County • Silver, lead, and zinc mining • Oil and gas leases • Tellurium exploration on Findly Gulch • Gold and Silver in Saguache County by Bonanza • Gold in Rio Grande County
Social Sustainability	• Mining is no longer economically viable in Mineral County. • Price of minerals has decreased, and production costs have increased. • Oil and gas industry has higher wages than mining. • Community development potential is lost if mining is no longer viable. • Loss of mining industry decreases population, which has social repercussions.
Economic Sustainability	• Mining industry supports workers, as well as the entire local economy. • Resource significance depends on location and proximity to communities. • Mining supports the economy year-round, whereas tourism is seasonal. • Economic and social sustainability go hand-in-hand.

What is your number one concern when contemplating surface impact from oil and gas development?

Water Quality	• Mine tailings, even though water is currently pumped to treatment facilities. • Water quality impacts to wildlife.
Tourism	• Tourists want to see old mines, not current operations. • Oil and gas visibility affects the recreation economy.
Wildlife	• Mining effects on wildlife are not always negative. • Wildlife can become accustomed to landscape changes if not harmful. • Fish are negatively impacted by damaged watersheds and riparian areas.
Socio-Economic Impacts	• Population may decrease if community does not value these resources. • Public does not want the societal changes that accompany energy development. • Boom-and-bust cycles impact community health. • Management adaptability is imperative to handle emerging technology and other unforeseeable situations.
Current Conditions	• Scenic Highway 149 must remain scenic regardless of resource development. • River corridor must remain visually appealing.

How and where should non-commercial rock collection, for example river rock or landscaping rock, be permitted on the forest?

Management Practices	• Increase limit to 100 pounds per day, 1000 pounds per year • Do not require a permit for collections under 100 pounds in one day. • Limit collection sites by utilizing designation. • Designate certain collection sites for larger collections.

Where are there abandoned mine hazards on the forest?

Mine Identification	• Some old mines are now economically viable with technology development. • Locals are sometimes hesitant to share mineral locations because of new industry viability. • Deep Creek area has lots of uncovered mine shafts.
Mine Coverage	• USFS tried to cover mines 15 years ago, but did not cover all of them. • Some old mines are leaking contaminated water and need to be identified. • Mines that are detrimental to the economy should be covered, and this should be a new guideline in the Forest Service plan. • Shafts should be stabilized for safety reasons, but not permanently sealed.
Management Practices	• Streamline current permitting process. • Address the fluctuation of mineral prices. • Keep suction-dredging economically feasible for small mining operations. • Balance protecting the environment with encouraging miners. • Utilize adaptive management to accommodate changing technology.

Additional Discussion

Forest service staff asked participants to submit written ideas on how to incorporate adaptive management into the new plan. Some participants stated that the Forest Service must first identify and define their absolute values and then create an impact statement. To do this, the FS would need to develop an exhaustive list of if-then statements. Other participants discussed whether it is possible to define something that does not currently exist. The Forest Service urged the public to continue thinking about this issue and share any ideas or solutions.